

T E N N E S S E E F O L K L O R E S O C I E T Y
B U L L E T I N

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The Bulletin of the Tennessee Folk Lore Society is issued four times each year. It contains articles and studies on various aspects of folk-lore investigation. The third annual volume, now beginning, promises some interesting and valuable studies.

There are two forms of membership in the society. Individual membership, with subscriptions to the Bulletin, \$1. Institutional membership, with two copies of the Bulletin for the library of the subscriber's institution, \$3.

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOME OF THE OLDER BELIEFS AND USAGES OF EAST TENNESSEE

In 1902 W. G. Wood-Martin published a two-volume work entitled Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland, an analysis of Celtic tradition as charming as it is free from the usual extravagances of Celticism. But notice the title, "Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland." Traces of the cults of the aborigines, traces of paganism, in a word, those are the connotations. It is some such title that I would like to give to this paper in place of the prosaic one it bears. I have purposed to limit my comments to superstitions which, though recorded very recently in East Tennessee, bear the unmistakable stamp of antiquity and which have rich heritage on both sides of the Atlantic. In many instances, the older beliefs had inception in pre-Christian times and thus are often incompatible with the teachings of Christianity. This curious syncretism is, of course, quite typical of European folklore.

My purpose to limit this discussion to older and rarer beliefs may lead me into difficulties. First of all, very few of the superstitions mentioned here were believed by the informants, and for the most part were not even believed by the persons from whom they had them. Thus the beliefs and usages mentioned are entirely vestigial. Secondly, many of the superstitions occur endemically, i. e., confined to one locality, and for that reason it is often possible to suspect an indigenous origin of a superstition which seems to have a rich background but which may, in reality, be merely based on similar philosophy. In the third place, when one seeks to find rare beliefs one is tempted occasionally to use leading questions. There is the famous case of the French scholar who, after a short visit to Wales and Men, made the assertion that the inhabitants of those territories still had a sort of animistic worship. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, of course.

The method, as I have indicated in the title, is a comparative one. This method assumes:

1. The tenacity of belief among lower and less privileged classes.
2. The long ancestry of many beliefs - not all.
3. The perpetuation of belief after the mores have changed and after science and religion have brought a new philosophical picture.

I mention in passing that the customs of Europe which required participation of whole villages and whole communities are conspicuously absent in East Tennessee folkways.

In East Tennessee folklore there is no maypole, and with one exception, which I shall discuss later, there are no midsummer fire festivals. The folklore of East Tennessee reflects the social structure of the Eighteenth Century American backwoods, rural and isolated, in which the family group is the center.

I have avoided as carefully as possible many of the errors into which such a study may easily fall. I am skeptical, for example, of all attempts to explain superstitions as solar myths, although heliocentrism is certainly to be found in East Tennessee folklore as well as in that of other parts of the world. I also avoid the popular fallacy of inferring ethnological connections just because of resemblances between superstitions which occur in localities widely separated spatially and chronologically. In most of such cases a simpler explanation may be made on the basis of similar philosophy. This is not to say, however, that ethnological diffusion has not taken place.

I must explain, before passing on to the body of the paper, that I have one obsession of which I cannot rid myself. I am very much afraid that I see phallic rites in usages which can be given much simpler explanations. And yet it is true that the phallus crops out in the folklore of every country - as, indeed, one might expect it to, because of supposed economic necessity. Thus in the procession of the Ugly Perchten of Central Europe one finds a mummer who carries a sausage-like roll or effigies of children with which he strikes at girls or women whom he passes in the street. Since the whole ceremony is intended to promote fertility of flock and field, it is only sensible to assume that the roll and the effigies once had phallic significance.

In primitive thought, the propagation and growth of the plants of the field and forest were inextricably linked with sex, just as is the propagation of animals. Anything which was supposed to possess some measure of vitality was thought to have a sex life. It was a vital necessity to man that both plant and animal should increase exuberantly; else would he be unable to secure food. It followed quite naturally that, if plants were supposed to reproduce sexually just as do animals, there were ways by which their propagation could be quickened imitatively, and that these ways should involve the sexual experience of animals. Consequently, many obscene rites were devised, according to the principle of imitative magic, which suggested rampant sensuality and lasciviousness of man and animal, on the theory that if animals seemed in the way to become especially fecund, the plant world would be forced to produce a correspondingly lush growth. In proportion as the sexes joined in actual or simulated intercourse, the corn would grow and the vine would bear and there would be food for

everyone. And yet the same principle that actuated the grossest orgiastic rites on the one hand, on the other hand rigidly demanded continence on the ground that it would conserve sexual energy which would, homeopathically, be absorbed by the fruit and the grains.

In Southern Europe an effigy of the male organ of generation, called phallus, was extensively used in the Dionysaic revels to promote alike the growth of crops and the propagation of the human species. Of course, as time went on, the original significance of the phallus was forgotten and it came finally to be merely an appurtenance of the comedian's paraphernalia. And yet in places it has been in continuous use to quicken crops. Modern survivals are to be seen in Asia Minor. We have mentioned above the phallus used in the Ugly Perchten rites of Central Europe.

It seems quite a step from the Dionysaic revels to relatively modern East Tennessee, but the experienced folklorist will not have to be convinced that in folklore remoteness is, more often than not, a rare thing. A survival of these ancient rites - or, again, if not a survival, at least a custom based on similar philosophy - existed in Tennessee only about sixty years ago near a little settlement, then called Phebe, on Powell's River, some twenty or thirty miles above the government dam at Norris. It has been reported to me by four or five informants who lived in the region, that at one time the farmers of the neighborhood thought it was necessary in planting turnips to hang a long-necked gourd between their legs to symbolize the male organs of generation. They would march through the plowed fields sowing the seed and chanting as they went an admonition to the turnips-to-be to equal in size the gourds they wore - and employing an obscene term to designate the gourds which they actually identified with their own organs. Two walnuts were sometimes placed inside the gourd, adds one informant.

Apparently, the masculine element of sex was thought necessarily predominant in the planting of turnips. This may be inferred from the fact that a woman was thought completely incapable of having any success at all in raising turnips unless she wore an unusually large gourd-phallus.

And yet woman, because of her position with reference to birth and care of the child, is usually thought to be able to impart fertility to the field and orchard. It was partly due to this feeling that the Indian squaws were permitted to take care of the agricultural interests of the tribe, states Sir J. G. Fraser in The Golden Bough. This belief, too, is found at Phebe. Mrs. V. V. (I was asked to withhold the name) was once taken to task for having walked through a neighbor's field, whereat she replied with some heat, "Don't you know corn grows best where I walk?"

Cucumbers were supposed to grow much better when planted by women than when men planted them, and there is some reason for thinking that they were to be planted on May Day in a manner similar to that in which turnips were planted. You will remember that it was supposed to be very unusual for a woman to have luck in raising turnips. Perhaps, the very shape of the two vegetables may explain this belief.

In one community near Phebe, Blue Spring Hollow, it is said that when turnips were sown it was the custom to tie weights, such as bullets and nails, to the male organ before entering the field. My informant tells me it was believed that the more weights the sower could support the greater would be the crop of turnips. In this case, as well as that of the gourd-phallus, tremendous size and weight of the phallic symbol is sought in order that the crops will be quickened. We shall note below other instances of weights used in fertility rites.

The first day of May, Walpurgis Day, or Beltane, as it has been variously called, is ostensibly in recent conception, a date on which languishing young maidens may augur the coming of their princes charming, but its past history is at times unprintable. It was, of old, a vernal festival intended to promote the growth of vegetation and attended by such obscene rites as we have mentioned above in connection with the early history of the phallus. In the course of the ages, it had been purified by asceticism, Platonism and what-not, but just the same, survivals of the old pre-Christian beliefs cling with the tenacity that characterizes folklore in certain parts of the Old World.

In East Tennessee, there was a custom observed rather recently which seems to be a survival of the old spring festivals, although it is just as likely to deserve another interpretation. Many farmers thought it necessary when planting watermelons to go to the fields before sun-up on the morning of May Day, usually without speaking, and, after removing trousers, plant the watermelon seed in shirt-tails. This may very conceivably be a vestige of an older and more obscene usage in which it was perhaps necessary that the male organ be uncovered. My mother tells me that farmers of yesteryear had a habit of doffing underclothes on May Day, and if we may legitimately add one usage to the other we may infer that removal of the trousers entailed appearance "in the nude" from waist down.

Stones apparently were thought to possess some power of fertilization, for it is generally believed in East Tennessee among the less progressive fruit-farmers that a rock tied to the branches or forks of a fruit tree which has not been bearing, will bring about a heavy yield of fruit. Undoubtedly, it is the weight of the stone which is thought

to symbolize and thus bring about the heavy load of fruit.

But, if the fertility of the crops may be quickened imitatively by actual or simulated venerary, it may also be quickened by transference of fertility from a person or thing possessing a superabundance of it to the plant which is barren and will not yield. Fecundity, in primitive thought, is considered a thing, not a quality--a thing which can be given or received just as can any material substance. It is on this principle that the pregnant woman is thought to be capable of quickening the crops. She imparts to the barren soil some of the power thought to be vibrant within her, and which in primitive thought is identical with that force which causes the growth of vegetation.

Following this principle, the farmers near Phebe used to have a pregnant woman shake all the trees in their orchards which would not bear, thinking this would increase the yield of fruit. This belief that the pregnant woman possesses the ability to fertilize fruit trees is quite common over the entire world.

Similarly, the farmers near Phebe thought that if a pregnant woman dropped their beans the crop would be much larger than ordinary. Some negroes in Knoxville, reports an old negress whom I know, think that if you allow a pregnant woman to cut your hair it will grow back thick and long.

It is a curious fact that fire is often thought to have fertilizing properties. Sir J. G. Frazer gives the following examples: An ancient Aryan custom required the groom to lead the bride around the hearth, probably as a means of securing offspring, while a similar rite was performed regularly by Hindus, accompanied by a prayer to the fire-god, as a cure for sterility. In South Slavonia a wife receives two burning brands from a log and she places these brands in a vessel of water. She drinks this potion as a means of preventing barrenness. Among the French peasantry today it is believed that a woman who can blow a smouldering ember into flames is a virgin. This of course is in accordance with the opposing theory that chastity stores up energy.

A few weeks ago, I was told by a student in the University of Tennessee that a very rare belief heard in Marion County has it that if a man and a woman who love each other lie down beside a fire it will burn brightly. The fact that the lovers must lie down, it seems to me, is worthy of notice. Of course, the oft-heard saying that if you name a fire after your lover and if your love is requited, the fire will burn brightly cannot be placed in the same category.

We move on to beliefs that are no less ancient though perhaps more palatable. A young lady who lives near Bearden

reports that at one time it was believed in lower Knox County that the milk of a white cow, milked by a maiden, was good for the headache. The superstition occurs in the same phrasing and with the same provisions in Irish folklore, according to the word of no less an authority than W. G. Wood-Martin. A king of Leinster, ages before the Christian era, made his soldiers bathe in the milk of 150 white and hornless cows. The fact that a maiden must milk the cows is curious.

A remarkable mortuary custom reported by a friend of mine who once lived in Hawkins County and who says she first heard it there, requires relatives of the deceased to place a dish of salt on the corpse, after which each person in the room is expected to taste of the salt. No reason was given for the belief. In Phebe, however, the same custom was observed, but here it was said that the custom was intended to reduce the swelling in the corpse. This, it seems to me, is a good example of rationalization on the subject of an old belief, the original meaning of which had been forgotten.

In many places in East Tennessee it is, or was, believed that to wear the clothes of the dead would surely bring death. At Phebe it was said that the clothes of the dead soon rot, probably as the body of the owner decays in the grave. At Blountville, Tennessee, it was thought merely to be bad luck to wear the clothes of a dead person. Another superstition recorded in East Tennessee has it that if you give away the clothes of a dead person the ghost of the dead will return to haunt you. Perhaps it was originally thought that the clothes should be buried with the corpse. Curiously enough, Curtin in his Tales of the Fairies, tells of the belief that the clothes of the dead should be given to the poor or to friends lest the dead return and demand that this be done. But first they were to be wet in sacred water for three Sundays, so perhaps the immanent evil was believed here also.

A curious custom reported in Middle Tennessee attends the finding of water in digging a well. When the water is struck the diggers shout, a whistle is blown and a bell rung. Then one of the men jumps from the pit, seeks out a cow in a nearby field, and sends her sprawling by grasping her by the hind legs. I must confess that I am at a loss to account for this custom. The most reasonable explanation, it seems to me, is that the freshness of the stream of water was thought to be communicated to the cow and to promote a flow of milk into her dugs. In Union County, for example, it was customary to throw the beastings into a stream of water on the theory that this would promote a good flow. Of course there are old Irish märchen which tell of the deaths of persons who found magic springs, etc., and these tales indicate a pagan custom of sacrificing

persons to the water-spirits. Black, in his Folk-Medicine, relates that Prince Caradoc struck off the head of St. Winifred which thereupon rolled into the Church of St. Beuno and on the spot where it stopped a magic spring gushed forth. All this, however, is rather remote and is probably not related at all to the belief reported in Middle Tennessee.

I have said above that I am very skeptical of theories which explain superstitions as solar myths. And yet there are certain beliefs reported in East Tennessee which can be explained on no other basis. Throughout the world the sun is apparently taken as the supreme guide of movement. Movement with the sun is used in protective magic while the countersunwise movement employs the evil principle and so is an element of black magic. In the Highlands of Scotland the sunwise movement is known as *descaal*, the right way, and the countersunwise movement is known as *tuathal* or *withershins*. J. G. Campbell in Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland reports that in Scotland all visitors approach the house of a friend by the *descaal* way, otherwise, I suppose, they would wish to bring harm to the person visited. In East Tennessee it was believed that soup and other liquids should always be stirred with the sun. Near Phebe it was said that salts should be stirred countersunwise if an emetic was desired, or sunwise for a purgative. A belief reported in Unicoi County has it that to sleep with the head toward the sun is a bad omen and will sometimes cause sunpains. Another belief, also reported in Unicoi County, looks suspiciously like the ritualistic "Holy Round", of which examples may be had in Le Braz's La Légende de la Mort chez les Bretons Armoricaains. According to this belief, all religious processions should follow the course of the sun in order to obviate the occurrence of misfortune. Again, another Unicoi County belief requires batter to be stirred sunwise. The reverse motion is said to bring bad luck or at least failure of the batch.

I have said above that there are few, or no, examples of midsummer or Beltane-fire festivals in the folklore of East Tennessee. However, it was recently reported by an informant who lives in Marion County that it was once customary for people in her neighborhood to pile up all bush and undergrowth cleared from new ground and to leave this in stacks until May Day Eve, at which time it was set on fire. May Day Eve was, of course, the date on which one of the most important of the fire-festivals was held, but my informant had never heard any explanation given for the custom.

Urban Anderson
Knoxville

CURRENT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FOLK LORE

Two years ago, in the first issue of The Bulletin of the Tennessee Folk Lore Society, Professor J. A. Rickard printed a list of some fifty helpful books on folk-lore. That list was intentionally general, to suit the beginnings of a need. Now our beginnings are past. And studies treating a number of details in folk-lore have already been published by members of the society.

Over the country, activities concerned with folk-lore seem to be increasing. A department of the federal government has shown interest. New societies like ours are developing. New investigators are collecting. New collections and studies are appearing. And a new quarterly for the publication of southern folk-lore is in the field.

As the Tennessee Folk Lore Society begins its third year, it seems well to take stock of what is being done around us. Therefore, it is our intention, with the bibliographical resources at our command, to devote an occasional page of the Bulletin to classified lists of some of the recent publications. The first list will appear in the next issue of the Bulletin. To insure inclusion of all interests, members of the society are urged to mail notices of their publications and projects undertaken to Hill Shine, Department of English, Maryville College, Maryville, Tennessee.

Present space allows three announcements, of wide interest.

1. The first issue of the new Southern Folklore Quarterly, published at the University of Florida, Gainesville (Alton C. Morris, editor), is to appear in January, 1937.

2. The second (April) issue of The Southern Folklore Quarterly will carry a full report prepared by the committee of the folk-lore group of the Modern Language Association of America (Professor Reed Smith, chairman of the committee) on the status of investigation and collecting of folk songs in America.

3. The same folk-lore group of M. L. A. is appointing a similar committee on proverbs, to report at the 1937 meeting of the group at Chicago. Both of the committee reports, it is understood, will contain announcements of work in progress and recommendations for future projects.

H. S.

THE SOCIETY'S PROGRAM FOR 1937

The Tennessee Folk Lore Society held its third annual meeting at Maryville College on November 14, 1936. Officers for the coming year are President, T. J. Farr, Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, Cookeville; First Vice-President, L. L. McDowell, Smithville; Second Vice-President, E. G. Rogers, Carthage; Third Vice-President, Urban Anderson, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Secretary, Edwin R. Hunter, Maryville College, Maryville; Treasurer, Miss Geneva Anderson, Sevierville Road, Maryville.

The two years of history and experience have done much to outline the scope of the endeavor of the Society and to discover the persons in the state interested in and qualified to work in the various aspects of folk lore investigation. With this history behind us, we are undertaking to allocate definite responsibilities to persons throughout the state who may act as leaders and organizers in these various lines of study.

A number of letters have gone out asking persons to undertake specific work of this sort. So far not all have replied but enough have to encourage greatly our hopes of success for this scheme. Others, no doubt, will accept soon. We are publishing here the names and particular responsibilities of those who have accepted:

Traditional Ballad Survivals
Miss Geneva Anderson, Maryville

Folk Remedies
T. J. Farr, Cookeville

Riddles and Rimes
W. A. Redfield, Pleasant Hill

Contemporary Folk Ballads
E. C. Kirkland, Knoxville

Religious Folk Song
L. L. McDowell, Smithville

Proverbs
E. R. Hunter, Maryville

Legends and Folk Stories
E. G. Rogers, Carthage

Creative Writing on Folk Themes
C. H. Mathes, Johnson City

Folk Customs (Death, burial, marriage, festivals, etc.)
Neal Frazier, Murphreesboro

The Bibliography of Folk Lore Research
Hill Shine, Maryville

We shall not only welcome; we shall need the help and advice of the membership in making the Bulletin of the highest value. Please keep us informed of your own activities and of any good work in the folklore field which you know is being done by others.

* * *

Send membership fees to Miss Geneva Anderson,
Treasurer, Sevierville Road, Maryville, Tennessee.

Send materials and suggestions for the Bulletin
to Edwin R. Hunter, Secretary, Maryville College, Maryville,
Tennessee.